Repurposing MOOCs For Self-Regulated Language Learning In An English For Academic Purposes Course

Book Section

8 Repurposing MOOCs for self-regulated language learning in an English for academic purposes course

Barbara Conde Gafaro[1]

Abstract

This case study investigated the self-regulated learning strategies that university students employ while engaging with Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) as part of an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) course. Self-Regulated Learning (SRL) involves the processes whereby students plan, monitor, evaluate, and adjust their performance towards goal attainment. Literature from MOOCs identifies self-regulation as an essential feature of participants who successfully take part in such courses. Learners are anticipated to monitor their learning while working with the online material at their own pace and connecting with other learners around the world whenever they want. Using MOOCs as supplementary learning material for a face-to-face academic English course provides an interesting picture of the learning strategies that students use while embracing openness within a formal learning context. This paper reports on the data collected from two online questionnaires administered to identify and compare the SRL strategies that participants used before and after their MOOC engagement. Semi-structured interviews were also conducted to complement the quantitative data. Data analysis shows that strategic planning and metacognitive monitoring strategies tend to be used more than help-seeking strategies during MOOC engagement. Findings also highlight students' positive attitudes towards the study

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as well as their suggestions for future blended MOOC practices within academic English courses.

Keywords: self-regulated learning, MOOCs, English for academic purposes, SRL strategies, blended learning.

1. Context of the project

Language learning materials for specialised domains tend not to be widely available (Colpaert, 2016). This becomes an obstacle when attempting to present relevant materials to students who come from different areas of study to the EAP classroom. In a previous case study conducted by Beaven (2013), EAP students worked with MOOCs related to their fields of education as a way to compensate for the lack of well-designed subject-specific published materials in English.

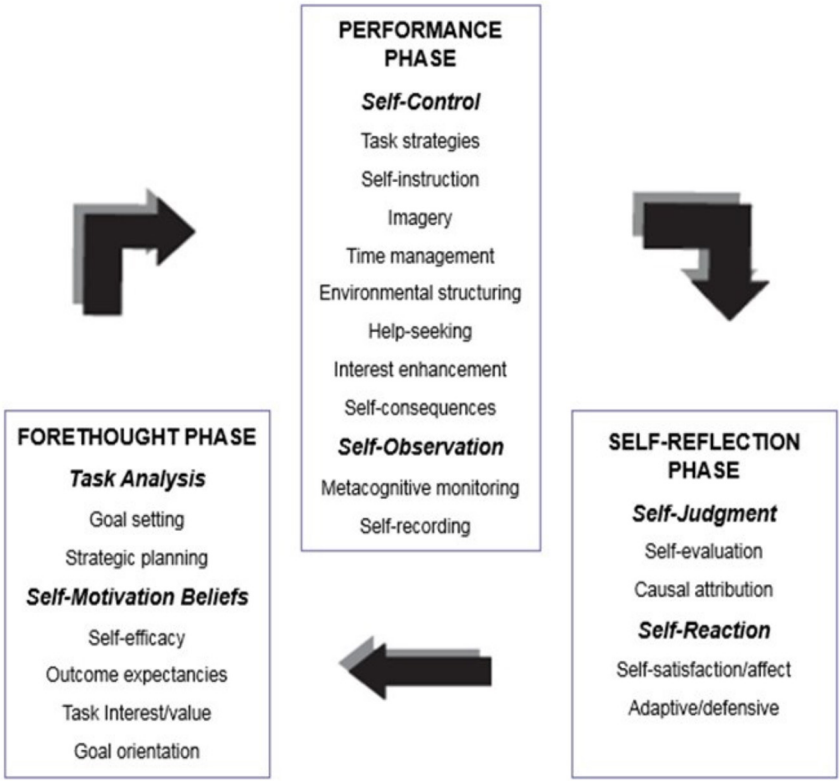
MOOCs, which represent the development of online learning at a massive scale (Daniel, 2012), are designed around the presentation of subject-specific resources (Sokolik, 2016). MOOC learners use a variety of strategies (de Waard, 2015; Littlejohn & Milligan, 2015) which are essential to regulate one's learning (Zimmerman, 2000). Therefore, this case study examined the use of MOOCs not only to supplement classroom activity, but also to identify students' self-regulatory strategies in an EAP course offered at the University of Ferrara in Italy.

The EAP course ran for eight weeks, from February to April 2018. During 15 sessions, students had two hours of classroom contact twice a week. Thirteen students from different study programmes took part in the project: five PhD candidates, three Masters students, and five undergraduates. Most of the participants had a B2 level of proficiency in English, which was adequate for engaging with the academic content of the MOOCs, since at this level students can understand the main ideas of complex texts in their academic fields (Council of Europe, 2018).

2. Intended outcomes

SRL is conceptualised as a process in which it is proposed that students assume responsibility for their learning through three cyclical phases – *forethought*, *performance*, and *self-reflection* – during which a series of strategies will be carried out to guide, regulate, and inform their learning (Zimmerman, 2000) (Figure 1). In language education, SRL occurs when students deploy metacognitive, cognitive, and social strategies to regulate their learning (Read, Bárcena, & Rodrigo, 2010).

Figure 1. Recent version of SRL cyclical model (adapted from Zimmerman & Moylan, 2009, in Panadero, 2017, p. 5)



Similarly, MOOCs tend to provide a flexible learning structure (Beaven et al., 2014) to create spaces for self-regulation. Research on MOOCs has begun to focus on exploring language education (Appel & Pujolà, 2015; Beaven, 2013; de Waard & Demeulenaere, 2017). However, there is little research in the field that examines students' self-regulation when taking MOOCs within their academic language courses.

MOOCs afford opportunities to engage with organised academic content (Margaryan, Bianco, & Littlejohn, 2015) which students can use to practise English (Beaven, 2013; de Waard, 2015). The wide range of courses offered in English – 7,548 courses announced by the time of writing (Shah, 2018) – represent an opportunity for students who seek to improve their EAP while accessing knowledge that may be relevant to their disciplinary specialisms. With this in mind, this study was intended to:

- identify the strategies that EAP students use to regulate their language learning before and after working with MOOCs;

- encourage the connection of their language learning process with their academic area of interest.

3. Nuts and bolts

In Week 1 of the EAP course, all participants from different study programmes (see supplementary materials, Appendix 1) completed an online pre-questionnaire to identify the self-regulation strategies they were aware of using when taking a language course and to explore their previous familiarity with MOOCs. The instruments employed to survey participants' SRL processes were adapted from the Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire (Pintrich, Smith, Garcia, & Mckeachie, 1991) (see supplementary materials, Appendix 2).

From the second to the fifth week of the course, participants chose a MOOC related to their academic field and engaged with the material and activities that

they considered useful to their language learning needs. They were asked to use Class Central (https://www.class-central.com/), a search engine tool to browse MOOCs by subjects, providers, and universities. Although participants were free to choose what course content and activities they engaged with and how and when to do so, a minimum of two hours of study per week was advised.

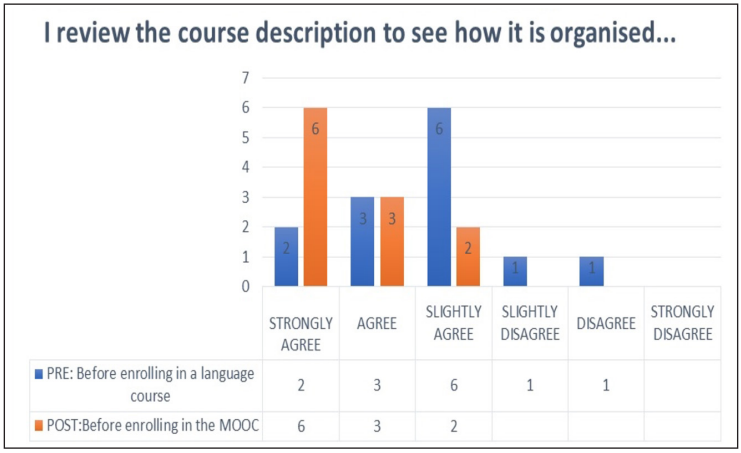
In Week five, 11 out of the 13 participants completed an online post-questionnaire to identify the self-regulation strategies they were using after engaging with the MOOC. Subsequently, voluntary semi-structured interviews were conducted in Weeks 6 and 7 of the course. Four interviewees expanded on the beliefs, opinions, and attitudes they held with regard to their MOOC learning experience by responding to pre-elaborated guiding questions adapted from an interview designed by Littlejohn and Milligan (2015) to probe SRL sub-processes of MOOC users (see supplementary materials, Appendix 3). The findings obtained from both online questionnaires and the semi-structured interviews are discussed below.

At the outset of this study, the familiarity that participants had with MOOCs was limited. None of them had ever completed a free online course before. However, in completing the online pre-questionnaire, participants framed their expectations of doing such online courses under the terms of *variety*, *flexibility*, and *autonomy.* Based on their initial perspectives, free online courses: (1) cover multiple subjects that fit different people's interests; (2) can be accessed anytime; and (3) do not have fixed schedules, so people can decide when to start or leave the course, select a particular topic, and review it as much as they want. Some of the participants also referred to these courses as a chance to improve their comprehension of spoken discourse related to their research fields (Participant 8); an opportunity to increase vocabulary and discuss with other users (Participant 17); and "a possibility to approach the language in a different and interesting way" (Participant 13).

Zimmerman's (2000) SRL cyclical model was employed during data collection and analysis of the findings. The items of both questionnaires were structured around the three phases and six sub-phases outlined in Zimmerman's (2000)

SRL cycle (Figure 1). In the first questionnaire, participants were asked to rate the set of items related to their typical learning behaviour in a language course. By contrast, the statements in the post-questionnaire focussed on participants' language learning behaviour in the MOOC they chose as part of their EAP course. Based on the data gathered from the pre- and post-questionnaires, it was observed that participants had different reasons to planning their learning before enrolling in both a language course and a MOOC (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Results from the pre- and post-questionnaires about strategic planning



Before enrolling in the language course, participants tended to check the course description, to be prepared for upcoming learning activities. In contrast, before enrolling in the MOOC, participants were more likely to check the course description to see how it was generally organised. One of the respondents, for example, stated: "I had a first look of the material, and I saw ok there are some videos, there are some papers to read, but it's not too much. Ok, yeah I can do it. I found it readable and feasible in general" (Participant 6). This slight difference in strategic planning carried out in the *forethought* phase might be associated with a lack of prior experience of MOOCs on the part of participants, hence the need to have an overview of the structure and topics of the online course they decided to work on during their EAP course.

Choosing a MOOC related to the participants' study programme was useful to compensate for the possible uncertainty that doing a MOOC for the first time involved. Being familiar with the content of the MOOC helped some of them focus more on their language skills, such as understanding the video-lectures, improving vocabulary, and presenting the course material to others in a clear way. Likewise, practising English while studying a relevant subject online allowed students to expand their academic knowledge, as outlined in some of the comments from the interviews:

> "even if my first aim was to improve vocabulary, then I found some interesting topics that could be related to my research field and my doctorate research proposal, so I started to following this MOOC to find, to search for other resources and also courses abroad so, for example, this one was related to a specific institution in Amsterdam related to Urban Planning" (Participant 1).

> "And, the best thing was that we had some links and references where we can study from them" (Participant 15).

Figure 3. Results from the pre- and post-questionnaires about help-seeking strategies

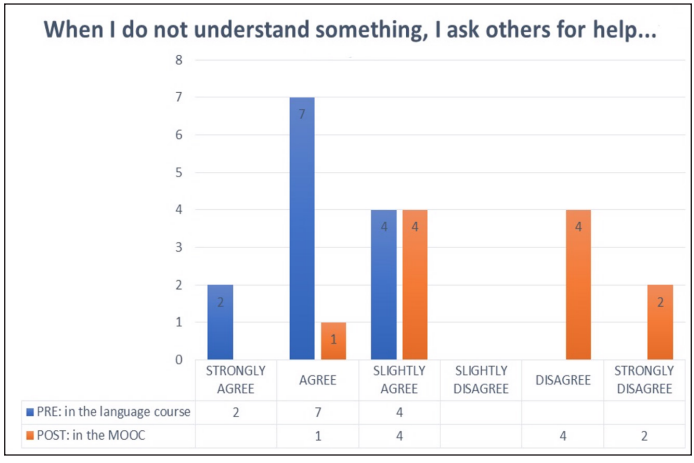
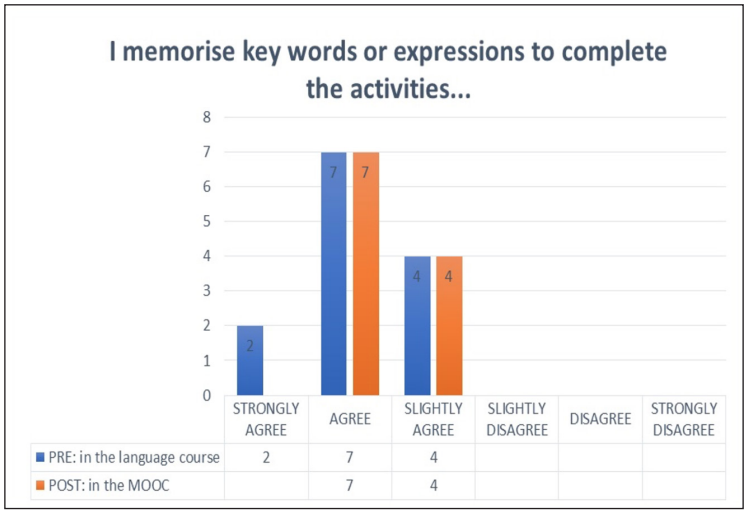


Figure 4. Results from the pre- and post-questionnaires about task strategies



Regarding participants' *performances*, they rarely translated new information from the language course and their MOOC into their native language. Help-seeking strategies were employed less during the MOOC engagement. However, memorisation was a task strategy equally used in both courses, as observed above (Figure 3 and Figure 4).

Metacognitive monitoring strategies, which are part of the self-observation processes (Figure 1), were also identified in the responses to questionnaires and interviews. Informal mental tracking of what participants were studying in the language course and the MOOC was mainly done by note-taking and by asking themselves questions to ensure they understood the course content. These strategies also helped some participants to be more aware of the strengths and weaknesses of their language skills while working with MOOCs, as pointed out by two of the interviewees:

> "It was very useful for my listening because of course, I had to watch the video and try to understand everything, so it's like to watch a TV

> series in English, but in this case it was a very good opportunity because it was about what I studied so again it was like I'm back in my Erasmus experience with the English teacher that they talked about Law and the module wasn't so easy because in general Law is not easy, so it was very great for me to improve again" (Participant 15).

> "Maybe I never thought about using a MOOC actually to learn English and the course itself gave me the idea to use the MOOC as a way to improve pronunciation, and to be able to speak and compare the speaking with the reading [the video script] because for example, I've been pronouncing the same words all over the years in a completely wrong way but I could not have the perception of it for example by watching a film or a TV series and I found this useful" (Participant 1).

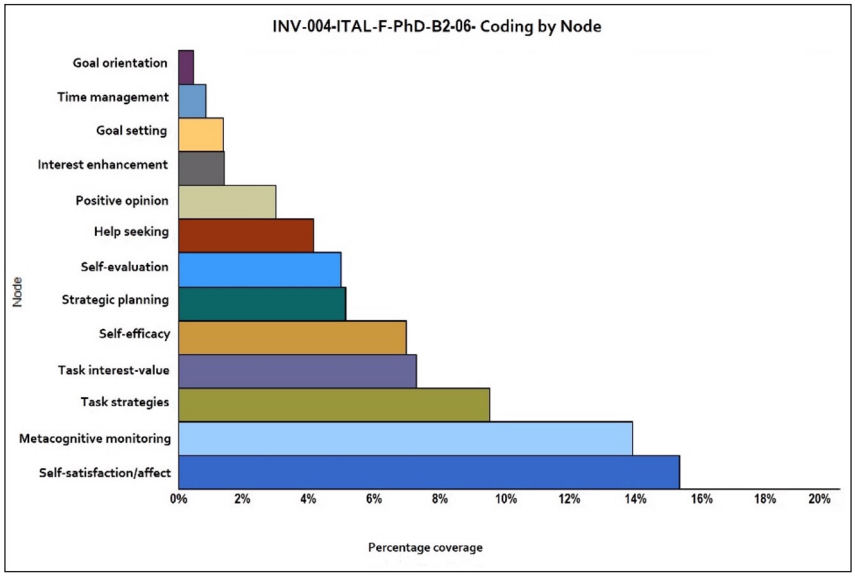
Self-observation processes are often linked to the processes involved in the *self-reflection* phase. Being aware of their learning strategies led some participants to reflect on and adjust the way they were engaging with their MOOCs. One of the interviewees illustrates this point clearly:

> "At the beginning, I started like… a university exam. So, I had the idea to do all and to finish it. And then I realised it was not the good strategy for a MOOC then I did, for example, two or three hours a week. And, in that time I did ok, today I am gonna do some writing, today I am gonna do something about reading… so I divided the thing or the MOOC with some little aim week by week. So, that was the process, the work I did with the MOOC" (Participant 5).

Participants not only engaged with the content and activities in the MOOC, but also made decisions on how to best approach the online material based on self-observation and reflection on their initial tactics in working with these online courses. In the last phase of the student's SRL process, self-judgment and self-reaction come together to influence the next round of forethought and performance sub-processes – thus, completing the self-regulating cycle (Zimmerman, 2000). Besides, informal reflection on – and adjustment of – participants' learning

behaviours in the MOOC played an important role in determining levels of interest and self-satisfaction when working with MOOCs, and this was observed while coding the four semi-structured interviews (Figure 5).

Figure 5. Main codes obtained from the interviews' transcriptions



The recorded interviews were transcribed and exported to the software package, NVivo. Then, a deductive approach to the coding of the transcriptions was carried out (Silver & Lewins, 2014), i.e. data was coded and grouped into themes corresponding to the self-regulatory phases and six sub-phases identified in Zimmerman's (2000) SRL cycle. Emerging codes such as positive or neutral opinions were also linked to participants' feedback of the project obtained from the post-questionnaire.

By the end of the study, participants were asked to summarise the experience of doing a MOOC as part of their EAP course. Overwhelmingly, they were pleased with their MOOC selection, describing it as: "a helpful and new experience that was surely useful to fulfil the purposes why I enrolled in the

EAP course" (Participant 4); "very satisfying and challenging" (Participant 9); and "an interesting, and sometimes even funny way of learning something new" (Participant 18). Only one of them expressed discomfort with the MOOC and preferred a face-to-face learning approach by stating: "I think frontal lessons are much more interactive and efficient. I did not like it very much" (Participant 8).

Although MOOCs were not completely integrated into the language classroom, students were asked to give a presentation about the MOOC they chose to their classmates. During the interviews, participants mentioned the use of strategies to help them prepare for this oral activity such as note-taking, drawing diagrams, and selecting specific topics from weeks of the course that were relevant to them. Lastly, participants discussed the merits of choosing MOOCs related to their interests, or different academic fields of theirs, as well as doing more speaking activities for future MOOC practice within academic English courses.

4. Conclusions

MOOCs, which have their roots in open educational resources and connectivist pedagogy, tend to be openly available to people around the world regardless of prior qualifications or professional experience. The open nature of such courses has led teachers and researchers to integrate MOOCs into the classroom as a pedagogical practice within the language education field. Nevertheless, there is little research that follows a blended MOOC approach for investigating self-regulatory processes in academic language courses.

This case study of SRL focussed on the level of strategic processes employed by university students who used MOOCs as supplements to an EAP course. Specific self-regulatory strategies employed by participants when engaging with digitally-enabled resources in MOOCs were identified after administering two online questionnaires and conducting semi-structured interviews. Findings show that participants were more likely to employ strategic planning and metacognitive monitoring strategies than help-seeking strategies during MOOC engagement.

In this light, the present case study suggests that working with MOOCs as part of an EAP course provided participants with an alternative learning approach whereby they had access to courses in specific disciplines that fitted their degree programmes as well as their language learning needs. Participants described this study as a new experience that took their language learning beyond the classroom. Accordingly, teachers are encouraged to implement blended MOOC practices within academic language courses. Lastly, it is advised to examine the self-regulatory processes that occur during the inclusion of such open educational courses within particular language classroom activities, thus closing the gap between classroom learning and open learning.

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Supplementary materials

https://research-publishing.box.com/s/9j8hwoqjwp497xckj06p049xfpm9n71o

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